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FOLLOW-UP TO THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN

Mandate, methods of work and multi-year work programme of the Commission on the Status of Women

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

At its thirty-ninth session, the Commission on the Status of Women requested a report by the Secretary-General on follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women. In its resolution 50/203 of 22 December 1995, the General Assembly invited the Economic and Social Council to strengthen the mandate of the Commission and requested the Commission to develop a multi-year programme of work and consider how it could integrate into its programme of work the follow-up to the Conference and how it could develop its catalytic role in mainstreaming a gender perspective in United Nations activities. The report discusses the mandate of the Commission, possible improvements in its method of work and proposes a multi-year programme of work.

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INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 50/203 of 22 December 1995, the General Assembly decided that the Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Commission on the Status of Women, in accordance with their respective mandates and with Assembly resolution 48/162 of 20 December 1993 and other relevant resolutions, should constitute a three-tiered intergovernmental mechanism that would play the primary role in the overall policy-making and follow-up, and in coordinating the implementation and monitoring of the Platform for Action. It invited the Economic and Social Council to review and strengthen the mandate of the Commission on the Status of Women, taking into account the Platform for Action as well as the need for synergy with all other related commissions and conference follow-up. It decided that the Commission on the Status of Women should have a central role in the monitoring, within the United Nations system, of the implementation of the Platform for Action and in advising the Council thereon. It requested the Commission to develop its multi-year programme of work for the period 1996-2000 at its fortieth session so that it might review the critical areas of concern in the Platform for Action and to consider how it could integrate into its programme of work the follow-up to the Conference and how it could develop its catalytic role in mainstreaming a gender perspective in United Nations activities.

2. At its fortieth session, the Commission should review its mandate, programme of work and organization of work in order to take decisions and make recommendations on how best it can follow up the Fourth World Conference on Women. This report is intended to assist in the Commission's deliberations.

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

3. It can be assumed that from 1996 through 2000, the main focus of work of the Commission on the Status of Women will be follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In determining its specific follow-up role, the Commission may wish to take into account a number of general considerations, including:

(a) Its role as a functional subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council in which it provides advice to the Council in the form of recommendations contained in Commission resolutions and in the form of draft resolutions for action by the Council;

(b) The role of the Council in coordinating United Nations system activities in the economic and social sectors and in integrating follow-up to recent United Nations conferences;

(c) Standing mandates of the Commission on the Status of Women which, while closely related to the implementation of the Platform for Action, predate the Fourth World Conference on Women, especially in the area of human rights;

(d) The limited time available for meetings of the Commission, now normally set at eight working days per annual session;

(e) The need to involve organizations of the United Nations system and of civil society in the work of the Commission, since recommendations in the Platform for Action are addressed to them.

II. MANDATE OF THE COMMISSION

4. The Commission's current mandate is based on the original mandate given in Economic and Social Council resolution 2 (II) of 21 June 1946 as modified by Council resolution 48 (IV) of 29 March 1947:

> "The functions of the Commission shall be to prepare recommendations and reports to the Economic and Social Council on promoting women's rights in political, economic, social and educational fields. The Commission shall also make recommendations to the Council on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights with the object of implementing the principle that men and women shall have equal rights, and to develop proposals to give effect to such recommendations."

5. The basic mandate was supplemented by Economic and Social Council resolution 1987/22 of 26 May 1987, which was a result of the Commission's 1987 session on follow-up to the Nairobi Conference, in which the Council:

> "Decides to expand the terms of reference of the Commission on the Status of Women to include the functions of promoting the objectives of equality, development and peace, monitoring the implementation of measures for the advancement of women, and reviewing and appraising progress made at the national, subregional, regional, sectoral and global levels."

6. Under the terms of General Assembly resolution 50/203, there is to be "a three-tiered intergovernmental mechanism that will play the primary role in the overall policy-making and follow-up, and in coordinating the implementation and monitoring of the Platform for Action". The Commission is the first tier of the mechanism, which "as a functional commission assisting the Economic and Social Council, shall have a central role in the monitoring, within the United Nations system, of the implementation of the Platform for Action and in advising the Council thereon".

7. The Assembly specified part of the outline of that role when it requested the Commission "to consider how it could integrate into its programme of work the follow-up to the Conference and how it could develop its catalytic role in mainstreaming a gender perspective in United Nations activities, taking into account the need for a focused and thematic approach to the review of the Platform for Action and the contribution that can be made by all other functional commissions of the Council".

8. In addition to the existing mandates, this might imply that, through reviewing the implementation of strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern contained in the Platform for Action, the Commission could make substantive recommendations to the Council on trends, emerging issues and new approaches to issues that are being dealt with in the mainstream in terms of the Platform for Action. It would also imply examining the mainstreaming of a

gender perspective in the activities of organizations of the United Nations system as they pertain to the implementation of the Platform for Action, as an input into the wider reviews of coordination and operational activities to be undertaken by the Council.

9. With regard to coordination, it would be important to define a practical approach to examining the extent of mainstreaming, bearing in mind the relative mandates of the Commission and of the Council on coordination. The Commission has, for the purpose of focus, the system-wide medium-term plan on the advancement of women, which, once it has been revised and adopted by the Council, the Commission has been given the responsibility of monitoring together with the Committee for Programme and Coordination. The Commission also has the responsibility, under the regulations and rules governing programme planning and budgeting, of reviewing the technical content and consistency of programme plans and proposals of the United Nations itself. It can also, in examining substantive issues related to the Platform, draw conclusions about the consistency and adequacy of system response, which can be brought to the attention of the Council.

III. STRUCTURE OF THE COMMISSION'S AGENDA

10. In the light of the above considerations, it would be important to maintain a certain degree of flexibility in the agenda for sessions through 2000, particularly in terms of how substantive work is combined for discussion, while agreeing on a consistent structure that corresponds to the mandate. The current agenda structure, adopted in 1987, includes essentially three items: priority themes, programming and coordination matters, and an omnibus item entitled "Monitoring the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women". Since 1992, the Commission, because of its role as preparatory body for the Conference, has followed a modified agenda, as was also the case for the provisional agenda adopted by the Economic and Social Council for the fortieth session in 1996.

11. By a decision of the Bureau of the Commission on 6 February 1996, the proposed agenda for the fortieth session has been streamlined to reflect the need to focus on follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women. This approach constitutes a starting-point for examining the agenda for subsequent sessions. In addition to a sub-item on mandate, methods of work and the multi-year programme of work of the Commission, which is applicable only to the fortieth session, the agenda includes sub-items on mainstreaming in the United Nations system and on implementation of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern.

12. Building on this experience, a possible approach to the agenda would be to combine the need for a long-term work programme with a built-in flexibility in the consideration of issues, as well as a clearer specification of what was formerly contained under the omnibus item. The following structure could be suggested:

(a) An item reviewing implementation of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern in the Platform for Action or parts

thereof on an individual or combined basis. The purpose of that item would be to provide a focused discussion of the issues addressed by the Platform for Action in terms of trends, emerging issues, effective measures and in terms of the consistency of work by organizations of the United Nations system;

(b) An item consisting of issues arising from the discussions of the Council or other intergovernmental bodies on which input from the Commission is considered important, including its review of trends, emerging issues and, to the extent that this is relevant, the coherence of work by organizations of the United Nations system in gender mainstreaming;

(c) An item on enjoyment by women of their human rights, containing work related to the long-standing work of the Commission in the development and monitoring of human rights instruments; the Commission's communication procedure; consideration of how to ensure that the United Nations human rights mechanisms address on a regular basis violations of the human rights of women, in cooperation with the Centre for Human Rights, and regularly take stock of that integration process while carrying out its central role of monitoring activities relating to the status of women, reviewing the joint workplan of the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Centre for Human Rights; and consideration of relevant information on other rights-based issues such as that provided by the United Nations Development Fund for Women on its operational work on violence against women;

(d) An item on review of mainstreaming in organizations of the United Nations system emphasizing the system-wide medium-term plan, review of programmes and plans of the United Nations and of matters related to the situation of women in the Secretariat.

13. In order to meet the request of the General Assembly to the Secretary-General to report annually to the Commission on the Status of Women and to the Assembly, through the Economic and Social Council, on the measures taken and the progress achieved in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it could be understood that the entire agenda should be seen in the context of follow-up. The Secretary-General could prepare a comprehensive paper synthesizing all of the items in the Commission's agenda for a given session, with a view to providing Member States with an overview of implementation. In the next stage of reporting, a summary of the results of the Commission's deliberations would be added for the consideration of the Economic and Social Council. The final version of the report, to the Assembly, would add the results of the deliberations of the Economic and Social Council.

14. It is assumed that much of reporting on national and regional experience in implementing the Platform for Action would be dealt with through the consideration of specific issues in the multi-year programme of work. However, at various points a more comprehensive approach could be envisaged, to be incorporated in the report noted in paragraph 13 above. For example, the Platform for Action requests all Member States to prepare national strategies for implementing the Platform for Action by the end of 1996. To the extent that these are provided to the Secretariat, an analysis could be prepared and submitted to the Commission at its session in 1998. Similarly, the third review and appraisal of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of

Women, including of implementation of the Platform for Action, is scheduled for 2000. This should reflect national experience and would normally be based on national reporting.

IV. MULTI-YEAR WORK PLAN

15. At present, the Commission has had a multi-year work plan only for priority themes. However, given the specificity of the Platform and the desirability of programming over a longer period, it would be useful to establish, to the extent possible, a multi-year work plan for those agenda items which have variable substantive themes.

A. Implementation of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern

16. In terms of the Commission's focus on implementation of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern, it would be important to ensure that, over the period 1996-2000, all of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas should be considered, either through the item on implementation or through examination of an emerging issue. It can be assumed, for example, that environment in its widest sense could be dealt with in the context of emerging issues. The table below shows a possible organization of areas for consideration over the period.

Table. Possible schedule for consideration of implementation of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern

Session	Strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas	Comment
Fortieth (1996)	Poverty (A) Women and Media (J)	
Forty-first (1997)	Decision-making (G) Economic decision-making (part of F) Armed conflict decision-making (part of E) Environmental decision-making (part of K)	Combined discussion of all issues related to actions in the Platform designed to increase the participation of women in decision-making
Forty-second (1998)	Women's human rights (I) The girl child (L) Violence against women (D) Rights aspects of armed conflicts (E); poverty (A); economic structure (F); environment (K)	Consolidated consideration of the main rights-based parts of the Platform for Action; and input to review the implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action
Forty-third (1999)	Education (B) Health (C)	Consolidated consideration of issues related to basic services as inputs for empowerment, including family-planning services; and an input into the five-year review of the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development

Session	Strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas	Comment
Forty-fourth (2000)	Comprehensive review of entire platform, based on the third review and appraisal of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies	

B. Emerging issues

17. It would be desirable to limit the emerging issues to be discussed each year to two. One could be a comprehensive issue that would be related to the multi-year programme of work of the Council or the General Assembly and could be programmed in advance. The other could be an issue that would be agreed by the Bureau of the Commission on the basis of decisions of the Council or the Assembly. Pending the determination of the Council's multi-year programme, it would be possible to specify only that environment should be considered in 1997 in order to permit an input to the special session of the General Assembly on the implementation of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

C. Review of mainstreaming in organizations of the United Nations system

18. It can be assumed that the Commission will want to deal with the issue of the status of women in the Secretariat on an annual basis. Under existing mandates, the Commission should also examine programme proposals on advancement of women in 1997 and 1999 and any modifications in the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001 in 1998.

19. The Commission might decide, in the context of its review of the system-wide medium-term plan, to request a mid-term report on implementation for 1998 and again in 2000 as part of the overall review.

20. During the period, under the terms of General Assembly resolution 50/203, the Economic and Social Council is expected to devote one coordination segment to implementation of the Platform. While the date has not been set, the Commission might consider recommending 1998 as the date, to benefit from the review of the system-wide medium-term plan.

V. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

21. There has been considerable concern in a number of intergovernmental bodies about using methods of work that will make maximum use of the time available during each Commission session. The importance of an interactive method has been stressed and is increasingly being used by the Council and its subsidiaries.

22. For the fortieth session of the Commission, the Bureau has decided, on an experimental basis, to propose that the Commission organize its substantive work on implementation of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern around a sequence of dialogues leading to agreed action-oriented conclusions on the issues concerned. The dialogues would permit Governments, organizations of the United Nations system and members of civil society, to whom action recommendations have been addressed under the Platform, to discuss practical issues of implementation. Under the agreed approach each theme would be dealt with through up to three meetings, based on dialogues, as follows:

(a) The dialogue on the theme would start with an expert panel, which would make presentations on the main issues involved and would respond to questions. The panel composition would vary according to issue, but could normally include an expert appointed by the Secretary-General to present an overview; an expert provided by the organization of the United Nations system most closely associated with the issue; at least two experts from Governments that had a particular expertise or experience in measures related to the issue; and an expert from civil society;

(b) The dialogue would continue with a meeting at which those organizations of the United Nations system working in the issue area, and in some areas a number of organizations of civil society, could make presentations of their perspectives on the issues and respond to comments and questions;

(c) The dialogue would conclude with an informal meeting among government delegations from which agreed conclusions that would be prepared by the Chair could emerge. The draft conclusions could be subject to the usual consultations before their final adoption.

23. At the fortieth session, it was decided that some issues required three dialogues, while others, where coordination issues were less acute, could be dealt with by two dialogues. In future sessions, the allocation of time to dialogues could be done flexibly in terms of both the item on implementation of the strategic objectives and actions in the critical areas of concern and the item on emerging issues.

24. The composition and selection of participants in the expert panel could be decided, inter-sessionally, by the Bureau of the Commission on the basis of proposals by the Secretariat.

25. Finally, as a matter of practice, at most of its sessions since 1990, the Commission has requested provision of services for a working group (or groups) to meet in parallel with the plenary meetings of the Commission. This has facilitated informal negotiations of complex texts. It can be assumed that, in

terms of the work programme of the Commission, in both enjoyment of women's human rights and programming and coordination, it might be desirable to consider requesting at least one parallel working group routinely during sessions from 1997-2000.